HABS No. WA-182

United States Border Inspection Station
103 Cherry Street
Sumas
Whatcom County
Washington

HABS
WASH,
37-SUM,
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service, Western Region
Department of the Interior
San Francisco, California 94102

HABS
WASH,
37-SUM,
1-

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

UNITED STATES BORDER INSPECTION STATION HABS No. WA-182

Location: 103 Cherry Street
Sumas
Whatcom County
Washington, 98295

USGS Sumas Quadrangle (7.5′), Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates:
49° North Latitude by 12 2°15′ West Longitude

Present Owner: General Servicea Administration
Public Buildinga Service

Present Occupants: U.S. Customs Service (Treasury Department)
Immigration and Naturalization Service
(Justice Department)
General Services Administration, Public Buildings Service

Present Use: Border Inspection Station. Construction of a new border inspection station has begun. Once the new facility is occupied, the existing building will be removed from the aite, or demolished.

Significance: The Border Inspection Station at Sumas is one of the early small buildings built by the federal government in Washington State. It is also an example of a prototypical "northern type" United States border inspection station from the 1930′s.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Date of erection: 1931-1932.

2. Architect: The building was designed under the supervision of James A. Wetmore, Acting Supervising Architect, Department of the Treasury.

3. Originsl and subsequent owner: The original snd current owner of the building is the federal government. The activities of the office of the Supervisory Architect of the Treasury Department were transferred to the Federal Works Agency in 1939. In 1950, the Federal Works Agency, snd seversl other Federal agencies were combined to form the General Services Administration (GSA). The Public Buildings Service, a brsnch sgency of GSA, assumed the duties of the Federal Works Agency.

4. Contractor: The Contractor for the building was John Barkost of Tscoms (business address: 2906 North Union Street). He came to the Tacoms area from Norwsy in 1906, and was responsible for the building of a number of structures in the Tacoms Area. For this building, Mr. Barkost used his own crew of carpenters from Tacoms, and hired local laborers ss needed, particularly during excavation and construction of the foundations.

5. Original plans and construction: The building is a two-story Dutch Colonial brick and concrete building. On the first floor are two main officea, and two private offices for Customs snd Immigation officisls. On the second floor are four offices, two holding cells, and restrooms. The building also has s full basement with two vaults, storage rooms, and spsce for the oil burner furnsce. The building is sited at an angle, facing northeaat. There were four driveways, three of which were covered by a canopy supported by wood columns. Also included in the project was an inspection garage which was a wood frsme structure on a concrete slab, and included two pits for vehicle inspections.

6. Alterations and additions: There were numerous maintenance and alteration projects, all of which, with the exception of a truck inspection facility addition, were designed by GSA. The significant changes are noted below.

In 1934, a wood frame storm vestible, approximately six feet square, was added to the southwest elevation at the door location. The vestibule was removed in 1961, when the truck inspection facility was added.

In 1955, a miscellaneous painting and improvements project was completed, which included replacing the northernmost window on the first floor of the northeast (front) elevation with a larger fixed sash window with muntins to match the existing windows. The existing flat arch and keystone were removed and the brick was replaced, supported by a concealed steel lintel.

In 1960, an incinerator was installed in an existing trash room in the northeast portion of the basement.

In 1961, a truck inspection office, warehouse, and loading dock was added to the southwest (rear) side of the building. The floor level of the one-story brick and concrete building with a flat roof, is raised approximately 3-1/2 feet above the surrounding grade, and is connected to the station building with a vestible. The architect for the addition, which is contrary in style to the historical character of the existing station building, was Richard H. Stradling of Bellingham, Washington.

In 1966, in a painting and lighting project, the entire electrical wiring system was replaced. Most of the existing light fixtures were also replaced.

In 1970, the front canopy was removed and replaced with a new canopy with more clearance above the roadway. The new canopy was attached to the building at approximately the eave line, and was supported by four square concrete columns with brick veneer. The existing roadway and traffic islands were removed and replaced. Outside inspection booths were also added. The center window on the first floor of the northwest elevation was removed and replaced with a door with a transom above. The existing inspection counter was also shortened to allow for more room in the Customs office area.

B. Historical Context:

Sumas was established as a Port of Entry for the United States in 1891. The name, Sumas, is of Indian origin, and translates to "land without trees". It is located in the Nooksack River Valley, and was established as a railroad town at the point where the Canadian and U.S. rail lines met. Early newspapers describe early Sumas as a raucous town of railrosd crews, government officials, Chinese, Indians, miners, timbermen, boomers, carnival people, dsnce hall girls, and gamblers.

By 1930, Sumas was a thriving bordertown. It served as the hub for logging and mining operations in the adjacent mountains, and the town was optimistic about oil drilling projects in the area. Agriculture was the major industry of the area. The Port had also grown to become the largest port in traffic and customs receipts, with the exception of Seattle, in the State of Washington. Customs and Immigrations operated out of a leased building, which is still standing, across Cherry Street from the building site.

In 1930, Congress appropriated funds for new federal buildings, $65,000 of which was appropriated for a new federal building at Sumas. At this time, a new station was under construction at Blaine, on the Pacific Highway (approximately 20 miles west of Sumas).

The original plans were for the contractor of the Blaine building (F.H. Williams, of Seattle) to build a duplicate building in Sumas. Property was acquired and a preliminary site plan was prepared by Mr. Williams showing the location of the new Federal Building. Demolition of the existing structures on the site began in May of 1931, with the anticipation that construction would begin in July.

At this time, two Sumas officials, A.J. Moe, Deputy Collector of Customs, and Fred C. Jenkins, Immigration Inspection in Charge, sent a letter to the Collector of Customs and Commissioner of Immigration in Seattle, which strongly criticized the design of the new station at Blaine and asked for numeroua design changes before a dulicate was built at Sumas. The letter, which was published on the front page of the local newspaper, complained that the floor space at the Blaine station was inadequate, there was no provision for foot traffic, there was not enough natural light in the building, and visibility from inside was too restricted. They also commented that the Engliah Colonial-type architecture was inappropriate for the building's function, and furthermore, not appropriate for the area.

The building was re-designed and advertised for bidding in July of 1931. The low bidder, of 17 bids, was John Barkost of Tacoma. Three-hundred calendar days were allotted for construction. Barkost's bond was accepted in November, and excavation began on December 10, 1931.

The work was slowed due to heavy rainfall and poor soil conditions. The specifications which called for an 18-inch layer of blocks below the foundations were altered to include some pilings. Crews worked day and night to complete the foundation and basement. At one point, just when the specified level of the footing was reached, a apring was struck, filling the entire excavation with three to five feet of water.

By mid-March, the foundation and basement work was complete. A cornerstone was placed which bore the inscription, "A.W. Mellon, Secretary of the Treasury, James A. Wetmore, Acting Architect". Work progressed quickly from this point, with the shell of the building being completed by July.

Changes in the original design were approved, and these included changing the second floor window design to permit opening and closing of a larger portion of the units, and the installation of a fourth trsffic lane for buses and trucks.

The building was completed and turned over to the Federal Government on October 1, 1932. An open house was held on October 23rd, and hundreds of residents from the area attended. Traffic was routed through the station on October 24, 1932.

During the course of construction, the progress was monitored by the local newspaper, the Sumas News. When it was completed, the building was described as a beautiful Dutch Colonial building, the most modern and up-to-date in the region.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. Genersl Ststement

1. Architectural character: This is an early example of a small scsle border station building. The architectural style of the building is Dutch Colonial, reflecting the high concentration of Dutch immigrants living in the area.

2. Condition of fabric: The building structure is in generally good condition, particularly in light of its constant use since its construction.

B. Description of Exterior

1. Overall dimensions: The building faces northeast (at a 45 degree angle to the city street grid) and measures 55 feet by 34 feet deep. Across the front was a canopy measuring 40 feet by 40 feet which was replaced in 1970. The building is two stories with a full basement.

2. Foundations: The basement is constructed with poured-in-place concrete, approximately one foot thick in the walls and up to two feet thick in the floor. The entire basement enclosure acts as a watertight floating slab, dispersing the weight of the building across the floor slab. This construction was necessary due to the poor soil conditions and high water table (approximately two to five feet below grade). The exterior walls in the storage areas of the basement are finished on the inside with 2 inches of terra cotta block furring. The interior walls are poured-in-place concrete 8 inches thick. No additional finishing, other than paint, was applied to the walls, floors, or ceilings, except for plaater over wire lath on the hallway walls.

3. Walls: The exterior walls are 12 inch thick solid-mortar, three-wythe brick construction with a header course at every other course (English bond with flush joints). The brick is red, with a slight variation in color, and the mortar is a cream color. At the four corners of the building, the brick is projected 1/2 inch to represent quoins. On the first floor, the door and window headers are constructed with a flat arch (jack arch) with a stone keystone. The opening is just below the concrete spandrel which surrounds the second floor slab. The exterior brick above the opening is supported by a concealed steel lintel. On the second floor, the window headers are constructed with a semi-circular arch (Roman arch) with a stone keystone at the crown and at the spring line on each side. The first and second floor window sills are cast stone.

4. Structural system: The exterior walls are supported by the concrete basement foundation. The first floor is supported directly on top of the basement foundation snd interior basement walls, and is constructed with reinforced concrete. Together with the basement, the first floor serves as a structural diaphragm for the building above. The second floor is supported by the exterior unreinforced brick masonry, and four reinforced concrete columns spaced evenly along the longitudinal centerline of the building. The roof is supported by site constructed, wood trusses spaced at 2 feet on center. The top chords are 3 X 6 and 3 X 8 members, while the web and bottom chords are 2 X 6 members. The truss members are lapped and bolted with 5/8 inch diameter bolts. The trusses are supported by a reinforced concrete spandrel which extends above the perimeter of the second floor. Steel reinforcing, placed at an angle adjacent to the dormers, was used to provide additional lateral resistance against the outward forces generated by the trusses. The roof sheathing is 1-1/4 inch wood.

5. Canopy: At the front of the building (northeast elevation) is a flat roof canopy. The original canopy was wood frame supported by 6 inch by 6 inch wood columns, finished with wood facing and trim to a size of 10 inches square, and was approximately 12-1/2 feet above the roadway. The ceiling had a stucco finish over wire lath, and the roof was a built-up composition roof. There was also a cast iron balcony railing around the perimeter. Two smsll flagpoles were placed on each side of the northeast end of the canopy. The canopy was replaced with the existing canopy in 1970. Beneath the original canopy were concrete islands which separated three lanes of traffic. Recessed at an angle within these islands were a series of mirrors which allowed the inspector to see the chassis snd undercarriage of each automobile. Each lane also included 3 recessed lighting units to illuminate the undercarriage of the automobiles. The lighting fixtures and mirrors were protected by 1-3/4 inch diameter bent steel bars. The mirrors and lighting units were removed as part of a driveway repair project in 1959.

6. Chimneys: The building has two rectangular chimneys at each end. They are flush with the ends of the building and project above the roof plane. The northern chimney extends upward from the basement and serves as the exhaust for the boiler. The southern chimney extends upward from the second floor and was of no practical use. It was apparently built to aesthetically balance the building.

In recent years, the vacant southern chimney has been a stopping point for migrating vaux's swifts, small dark-colored birds with long, stiff, gently curved wings and short, slightly rounded tails. The birds, sometimes numbering in the thousands, fly into the chimney one at a time (at dusk) and cling to the brick walls (and to each other once the walls are full). In the early summer months, it is not uncommon to see the birds leaving the chimney in a spiraling vortex at sunrise.

7. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: There is a psir of single doors, each with a leaded glass transom, centered on the front elevation. Each door is half-glazed with nine lights, 1/4 inch plate glass, and enters into the respective main office space of Customs and Immigration. The door at the rear of the building is centered on the southwest elevation at the level of the intermediate stair landing between the basement and the first floor. It is also hslf-glazed, with 1/4 inch plate glass, but with a single light. A wood framed storm vestibule was added to the rear door in 1934, and was removed when the truck inspection facility was added in 1961.

b. Windows: All windows are double-hung with chain operated sash weights snd are glazed with 1/4 inch plate glass. On the first floor, the bottom sssh is a single light, while the top sash has 12 lights. On the second floor, the bottom sash has 8 lights, while the top sash follows the arch shape of the window opening and has a total of 18 lights. The top sash was at one time operable with a pole, but has since been "painted" closed. (The top sash was not originally intended to be operable, but the design was modified during construction to allow for more ventilation.) A separate storm window sash was provided for each of the windows and each includes the same number of lights as the window unit. At the windows in the cells are hinged wrought iron grilles.

c. Window wells: At the rear of the building there are four window wells which align with the windows above. A single sash window, hinged at the top to swing inward, was located at each well. Each had 8 lights and were glazed with 1/4 inch plate glass. Soon after completion of the building (1934), wood frame covers were built over each well. The northern wells were altered when the truck inspection facility wss added in 1961. The southern two wells were at some time enclosed by plywood sheathing and are no longer used for light and ventilation.

Roof:

a. Shape, covering: The roof of the building hss a gambrel shape. The roofing material is a red shingle clay tile with a range of color.

b. Cornice: The wall and roof intersection is trimmed with a wood cornice molding. The molding returns on itself approximately twelve inches at the building ends. Attached to the cornice is a metal gutter with downspouts located six inches inward from the edge of the quoins on the building elevations.

c. Dormers: There are five dormers, evenly spaced, on both the front snd back of the building. They are constructed with 2 X 4 wood framing covered with horizontal wood siding, 4-1/2 inches exposed to weather. The roofing material is the same red shingle clay tile of the main roof, and the wall intersection with the main roof is counterflashed with copper.

C. Description of Interior

1. Floor Plans:

a. Basement: There is a full basement with rooms for the janitor, storage, heating equipment and trash. There are also two vaults with heavy vault security doors.

b. First Floor: The first floor is equally divided into two areas, each with a main office space and two private offices. The Immigration Offices are in the southern half, while Customs Offices are in the northern half. Each of the main office spaces includes a lobby area separated from the office space by a built-in, L-shaped, wood counter. The stairway is located at the center of the building, between the two office areas, and is accessible by both.

c. Second Floor: The second floor is divided by a corridor with four offices on one side, and two holding cells and restrooms on the other side.

2. Stairways: The stairway, located at the center and rear portion of the building, is constructed with reinforced concrete. The handrail, located at the center, is wood and is supported by wrought iron balusters and cast iron newels.

3. Flooring: All floors are wood, placed over a topping slab which was poured over the reinforced concrete floors, except at the restrooms snd lobby areas of the main offices. The floor in these areas is tile. The reinforced concrete floors were recessed 4 inches to allow for the placement of the topping slab.

4. Wall and Ceiling Finish: The exterior brick walls are finished on the interior with plaster over wire lath placed over 2-inch terra cotta furring blocks. The interior walls on the first floor are 4 inch terra cotta (6 inches around the stair hall), and are finished with plaster over wire lath. The interior walls on the second floor are wood frame with plaster over wire lath. The ceilings on the first and second floor are plaster over wire lath.

At the restrooms, the flooring is a 2 inch by 2 inch white ceramic tile with a 6 inch white ceramic tile cone base. Above the base is a wainscot of 3 inch by 6 inch white ceramic tile up to a height of 42 inches above the floor. The remainder of the room is finished with plaster over wire lath.

5. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: The door casings are wood molded. The doors are 1-3/4 inches thick style and rail doors in 4 designs:

1) Solid with 5 recessed wood panels.

2) Half glazed with obscured glazing above and two recessed panels below. These doors were used at the offices and included an operable clear glazed transom above the door. The obscure glazing is chip glass with a bubble type design.

3) Half glazed with obscured glazing above and two recessed panels below (no trsnsom).

4) Solid with 4 recessed wood psnels, with a wrought iron grill. The recessed panels are covered on one side with flush metal. These doors were used at the cells.

All doors on the first and second floor also had wood thresholds, with the exception of the main entry doors, the stsir hall doors, and the cell doors. The main entry doors had a metal threshold, while the stair hall and cell doors had a cement threshold.

6. Decorative features and trim: A wood picture molding is placed approximately 9 feet above the floor in all offices. There is slso a wood bsse molding in all offices.

7. Hardware: All hardware is plain with no ornamentation. The door locks are mortise type with plain escutcheon plates and round knobs. There is also sliding hardware for operation of the transoms (without using a pole).

8. Mechanical Equipment:

a. Heating: The original design called for a coal boiler to operate hot water heating apparatus. A coal chute was also provided at the north corner of the building. An automatic oil burning boiler was installed instead, and is still in use today. Radiators are located below most, but not all, of the windows on the first and second floor.

b. Lighting: While most of the light fixtures have been replaced, a few original fixtures still exist (primarily in the corridors and stair hall). The fixtures are plain in design.

c. Plumbing: All of the plumbing fixtures are located on the first and second floor. There were two sinks located in offices on the first floor. A water cooler was later added on the first floor and required the installation of vent pipe which is exposed in the second floor hallway. On the second floor, fixtures are located in the cells and restrooms. Each of the cells has a water closet and tank. The restrooms include water closets with tanks and pedestal sinks. In the men's public restroom there is a full height wall urinal. In the employee restroom, there is a janitor sink and shower. All of the fixtures are vitreous china and, with the exception of the first floor sinks, are still in use.

D. Site

1. General setting and orientation: The building structure faces northeast with approximately a 45 degree relationship with the International Boundary Line. This orientation allowed for both Customs and Immigration personnel to see the border from their respective offices. The original landscaping was primarily lawn areas with 3 elm trees along the northern border of the site, a single cypress at each end of the building, and assorted bushes at the property lines and building edges.

2. Outbuildings: Included as part of the station was a wood frame, single story, eight bay inspection and storage garage. The garage was oriented parallel to the International Boundary Line in the southwest portion of the original site, and measured approximately 20 feet by 85 feet. Access to the garage was reached through the alley at the southern property line.

The exterior of the garage was wood clapboard siding. Large double hung windows (12 lights per sash) were located on the north aide at each bay location, and at each end. Each bay had a aliding overhead door protected by 8 inch radius concrete bollards. The roof of the garage was hip shaped, and was covered with the same red ahingle roof tile as was used on the main building.

In the interior, two inspection pits for undercarriage automobile inspections were located at the eastern end of the garage. The garage was heated via an underground tunnel with steam pipes from the main building boiler.

The garage was moved, and shortened to five bays, when the truck inspection office was added to the station building in 1961. The new and current location for the garage is perpendicular to its original location on property purchased by the federal government directly south and adjacent to the original property.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Architectural drawings: The original tracings for the contract drawings including architectural, structural, plumbing and heating, and conduit and lighting drawings are stored at the National Archives and Records Service in Seattle, Washington. The original tracings consist of linen base drawings (sepia reproducibles) for a typical northern border station which were modified to suit the needs of this project. Original tracings for the subsequent alterations are also located at the NARS.

B. Historic views: Historic photos documenting the construction of the border station were made available by the General Services Administration, Public Buildings Service. The photographs are currently located at the border station building in Sumas.

C. Bibliography:

Sumas News, 5/30/30 through 10/27/32, published weekly. (Available at the University of Washington Suzzallo Library, Newspapers and Periodicals Collection.)

D. Likely sources not yet investigated:

National Archives and Record Service, NARS Record Group 121, Public Buildings Service. These records msy include written correspondence addressed to and from the Supervising Architect's Office concerning the design and construction of this border station.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

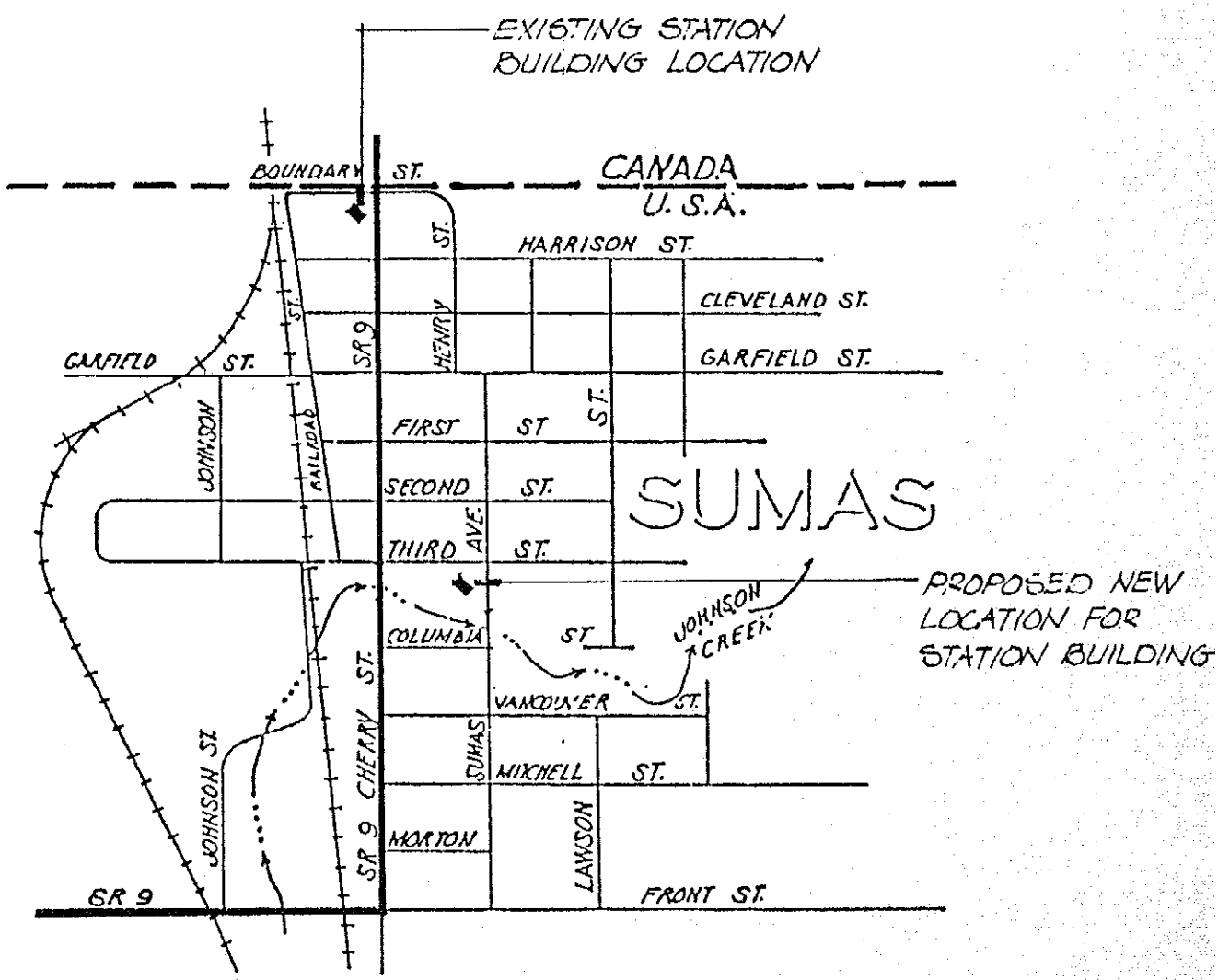
These records constitute the documentation required for compliance with the Memorandum of Agreement among the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, the Washington State Historic Preservation Officer, and the General Services Administration. The documentation was prepared in March, 1988.

The historic information and documentation was compiled by Ron Wright of Elaine Day LaTourelle & Associates, P.S., Seattle, Washington.

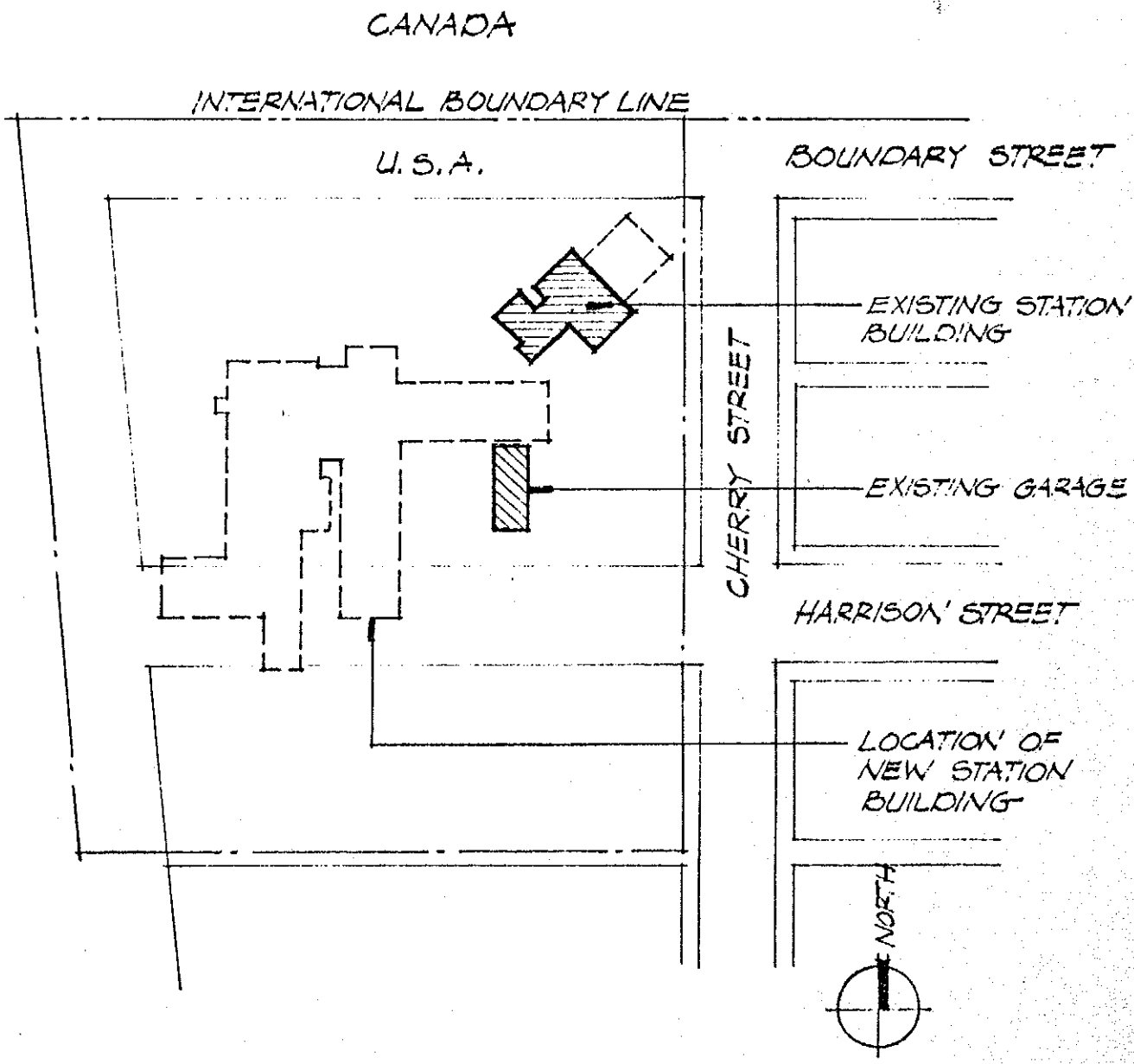
The photographs for this report were made by Chuck Schwartz, Precision Photography, of Bellingham, Washington, under the supervision of Ron Wright.

Submitted to the Historic American Building Survey in April, 1988.

LOCATION MAP



SITE MAP


CANADA
INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARY LINE
U.S.A.
BOUNDARY STREET
EXISTING STATION BUILDING
CHERRY STREET
EXISTING GARAGE
HARRISON STREET
LOCATION OF NEW STATION BUILDING
NORTH